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### Introduction to Communicating Christ to the world

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# *Introduction*

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Few would find it strange that Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini would address a series of pastoral letters to the people of his Archdiocese of Milan on the theme of communication. Cardinal Martini has a reputation both as a communicator and as an innovative leader of his diocese. A scriptural scholar and teacher by training, he has led the people of Milan in a process of renewal through a sequence of pastoral letters, missions, radio programs, and conferences. The letters on communication translated in this volume form an integral part of that renewal process. With an emphasis, first, on Christianity in daily living, the pastoral letters ask people to look at their own communication in the contexts of family, work, and entertainment. Second, they continue Cardinal Martini's attentive focus on the young people of the diocese. He connects family communication and mass communication to the situation of the young and uses those connections as a bridge to the ongoing renewal of the diocese.

In this Cardinal Martini is probably the only bishop to have worked out such a detailed program of reflection on communication. He shows himself as not just a person concerned with mass media but with communication in all its forms. In doing this he embodies the spirit and tradition of recent Church thinking on communication.

In the period since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has shown a greater—and indeed a more positive—interest in communication than it did before the Council. Where the Church had not hesitated to use print media for education, catechetics, or diocesan communication, it remained suspicious of the other mass media (particularly film, radio, and television). On several occasions different Popes warned against abuses of these newer media; conferences of bishops, particularly in the United States, set up oversight or ratings agencies. However, in *Inter Mirifica* (1963) the Council affirmed the positive nature of these media and encouraged their use as a pastoral strategy.

The Council also commissioned a more thorough study of communication; issued eight years later by the Pontifical Commission on Social Communication, *Communio et Progressio* sets out a detailed affirmation of communication in the Church and in society. Not only does the document describe the Church's role in mass communication; by stressing the role of dialogue in Church and society, it also recognizes the place of interpersonal communication in human life. Working from a doctrinal section that sees in Christ the perfect communicator and sees in communication the goal of expressing oneself in love, the document defends a human right to information and a right to inform. It calls on members of the Church to be generous in giving themselves to the service of the communication media and in helping the Church make use of media in proclaiming the Gospel. Finally *Communio et Progressio* stresses, at several different places, the importance of educating the recipients of mass communication messages in Christian principles so that they may participate more fully in the dialogue promoted by the media.

In the intervening 20 years since *Communio et Progressio* various ecclesial bodies have addressed the question of communication. Usually, these groups focus on mass communication. Sometimes they articulate a critique—as did the Latin American bishops gathered at Medellin, who forcefully called the media to task for promoting consumerism and other



non-Christian values. Sometimes they attempt to work out pastoral strategies—as the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference did in its statement, *In the Sight of All*; the bishops of France in theirs, *Nouveaux chemins pour la mission*; or the Latin American bishops in the third part of their Puebla statement, *La evangelización en la Iglesia de América Latina: Comunión y participación*.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes they provide specific and pragmatic guidance as did the Vatican's Committee on priestly formation when it described some ways in which communication should become a part of pastoral education in their 1986 *Guide for the Formation of Future Priests in the Means of Social Communication*.

Most recently, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication (as the re-named Pontifical Commission is called) commemorated *Communio et Progressio*'s 20th anniversary by reaffirming its main principles in *Aetatis Novae*. In addition this newer document calls attention to current developments such as the "information society," "mass media culture," the "media generation," and new technologies of communication (AN 2). *Aetatis Novae* outlines several pastoral priorities for the Church's work in communication: the defense of human cultures threatened by the mass media, the development of the Church's own media, the formation of Christian communicators, and the pastoral care of communications personnel. The document ends with a detailed listing of elements of a pastoral plan for communication in a diocese or region.

Similarly, since the Council, Popes have also dealt with communication issues—directly in annual Communication Day messages and indirectly in encyclicals devoted to evangelization. Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1976) put the matter quite strongly: "The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means of communication

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1. Administrative Board, U.S. Catholic Conference. *In the Sight of All: Communication, a Vision All Can Share*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986; Assemblée épiscopale de Lourdes. *Nouveaux chemins pour la mission*. Paris: Centurion, 1980; CINEP. Puebla: *Lectura y comentarios*. Bogotá: CINEP, 1978, pp. 91-94.

that human skill is daily rendering more perfect" (EN 45). And John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* (1991) highlights the communication media as a new sector for evangelization:

Involvement in the mass media . . . is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications (RM 37).

The Catholic Church is not the only Christian body to address questions of communication. The World Council of Churches has several times examined the communication situation. At its Vancouver Assembly in 1983, the World Council stated, "At its most effective Christian communication is person-to-person communication, like Jesus conversing with Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman. At its most effective it is what comes out of authentic experience. . . . It builds community, as did the early church." In the United States, the National Council of Churches has called attention to the world of communication and media as forming the context for the proclamation of the Gospel.

In addition individuals have also debated how the Church should use communication. Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles laid the foundation for a theological approach to communication by noting that the Church is communication.<sup>2</sup> The Church exists, he argues, to bring people into communion with God and with one another; this, in its very nature, is a communicative task. In reflecting on the work of the Second Vatican Council, Dulles recognizes that different models of the Church employ different approaches to communication. While warning that "concern with the techniques of communication

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2. Dulles, Avery. 1971. "The Church and the media." *Catholic Mind*, 69:1256 (October), 6-16.



must always be subordinated to the primacy of the Christian message," he notes that the different ecclesiological models implicit in the Conciliar documents "suggest that the Church should use a large variety of media and methods in its encounter with the different publics that make up its own membership and that of the surrounding world."<sup>3</sup> As with Church documents, some individuals stress the positive role communication can play, highlighted at one extreme by the North American television evangelists; others are more cautious and see in the media world a challenge to Gospel values. William Fore of the National Council of Churches of Christ points out, for example, that the "mythic world view" of television programs contradicts the Gospel on at least four counts: that the fittest survive; that power and decision making start at the center and move out; that happiness consists of limitless material acquisition; and that progress is an inherent good.<sup>4</sup>

## The Pastoral Letters: Background

Cardinal Martini writes about communication from this context. However, his is a pastoral approach, addressed to the people of his diocese to help them better live their Christian faith. His pastoral letters translated here form the basis of a two-year diocesan program on communication. Cardinal Martini discussed the philosophy underlying these letters in an address during the study days at the 1990 UNDA/OCIC World Congress in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> In his talk he distinguishes between a pastoral plan and pastoral programs. The former comprises

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3. Dulles, Avery. 1989. "Vatican II and communications." In R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives, Twenty-five years after (1962-1987)*, 3 vols. Vol. 3, pp. 546-547.

4. Fore, William F. 1987. *Television and religion: The shaping of faith, values, and culture*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, pp. 64-66.

5. UNDA, the Latin word for "wave," forms the name of the international Catholic association for radio and television. OCIC is the French acronym for Organisation Catholique Internationale du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel (International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual Communication.)

"all the ends and goals of the local Church, with all the ways and means to get to that. It is a composite of the picture which the local Church has of itself. It does not change with the changing of the bishop."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a pastoral program focuses on one point of the plan in order to advance it. Every one or two years Cardinal Martini issues a pastoral letter in order to highlight for the pastoral council, diocesan agencies, pastoral workers, and members of the diocese one aspect or another of the pastoral plan.

The overall pastoral plan for the Archdiocese of Milan consists of five elements: (1) silence and contemplation, (2) the Word of God, (3) Eucharist and community, (4) mission, and (5) charity. The Cardinal remarked, "All these five pillars will build up a complete idea of a Christian community."<sup>7</sup>

Communication, broadly defined, runs through each of these five elements. Silence and contemplation facilitate our hearing the Word of God. Christian community grows from the dialogue of people gathered together for the eucharist; their communication beyond their own community leads to mission and charity. The interplay of these elements with communication explains why Cardinal Martini will have no difficulty in these pastoral letters in shifting from an examination of concrete practices of conversation or television viewing to specific programs designed to promote faith development among teens or to aid parochial councils in their work.

The two communication pastorals call the attention of the people of Milan to communication within the Church and with the world. It is hard to ignore communication in Milan. The archdiocese is the largest in the world in terms of parishes (1,000) and personnel (3,000 priests, over 10,000 religious women, and over 5 million Catholics). Milan is a center

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6. Martini, Carlo. "Let's Organize Hope: Situations, Priorities, Methods," in *The New Media Age: Meeting the Challenge*, Unda/OCIC Study Days, Bangkok 1990. (Brussels: Unda/OCIC, n.d.), pp. 45-46.

7. Ibid., p. 46.

of Italian television production; it also has a good number of theaters and is a distribution point for cinema.

The Archdiocese runs one diocesan radio station and 40 parochial radio stations. Even if he wanted to, the archbishop of Milan cannot avoid communication. Cardinal Martini described an example of his practice to the UNDA/OCIC assembly:

Every week I give what I call the phone call of the bishop. I have a connection with this radio from my office desk. I can speak directly: 'Hello, here's the bishop. This is a phone call.' And I speak for a quarter of an hour very freely and tell the people the story of the past week—where I've been, what I've done, what the Pope has done, what were the major problems. I make this unprepared, it's much better. To make a phone call you don't prepare too much, just say what you have in mind.<sup>8</sup>

Cardinal Martini has even given a retreat by radio to the Carmelite monasteries of the diocese.

Print media also flourish in Milan. The diocese publishes seven weekly papers—for different parts of the diocese—as well as four magazines. The pastoral letters have a circulation that ranges from 100,000 to 1.5 million copies. It is from this material context that Cardinal Martini's pastoral letters on communication flow.

However, ecclesial and spiritual contexts also help us to understand the letters. Cardinal Martini also described these at some length to the UNDA/OCIC meeting:

My impression is [that] in our Church we have not yet understood the new challenge of the media sphere. We are awkward in communication. We have an inferiority complex before the great secular press or television or radio. We still don't know or appreciate the new language of the media with their insistence on conno-

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8. *Ibid.*, p. 47.



tation and vibration. We are ignorant of the new idioms and concepts of the religious language of today.

Therefore, we are still wrestling with the problem. Some possibilities are there, but the mentality is that of the old. We find, for instance, it is very difficult to persuade people to give money for a newspaper or other media. We have no difficulty to build a church, to fund an artistic door for the church. To give money for handicapped children, very easy; for leprosy, very easy; for Mother Teresa, very easy. But ask donors to give money for a new radio, very difficult.

Therefore we have no media consciousness. Not yet. This is one focus of the program [of my pastoral letters]. We are lazy and not creative in using the media we all know. Of course, we all, starting with bishops and priests, we complain a lot that secular media are as they are. We complain that through the media young children are put into the world of violence, pornography, a shallow vision of life. But we do almost nothing to make something against that, to recommend good and sound production. This is lack of media consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Cardinal Martini feels that the Church's weakness in communication leads it to one of two extremes: first, to glorify the media, to overestimate their power and to want to possess that power for the Church—to see in the media a kind of global pulpit from which to convert the world; and second, to have a deep suspicion of the media and to conclude that they promote every evil—and therefore to avoid the media. This lack of understanding of communication, he feels, connects to a larger dissatisfaction with communication at every human level—people feel cut off from one another. Cardinal Martini concludes that the media draw so much attention because they focus that dissatisfaction.

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9. Ibid., p. 48.

People are unable to communicate authentically, simply, frankly, sincerely. Mass media don't do anything else than to bring to light and to magnify this general feeling of disagreement. Sometimes media are accused of being the cause for the high degree of conflict. But I answer that they are not the cause. They are the effect of your mutual conflict. It's because you cannot come together in peace that you have a lot of suspicion and presuppositions against one another, even in church. Then of course the media magnify this. But the cause is in yourself.<sup>10</sup>

The challenge for Church communication, then, does not start with the media despite their power in the contemporary world; rather, it starts with seeing ourselves—members of the Church—as communicators. When we correct the distortions in our personal communication we will have a better sense of how to approach the mass media. Cardinal Martini's starting point is the communication of the Trinity: love.

## The Pastoral Letters

In accord with this analysis presented to the UNDA/OCIC meeting, he invited the people of Milan during the period of 1990-1991 to look at their own communication patterns—of both interpersonal and mass communication—in order to discover how these help and hinder their Christian journey.

The two pastoral letters, *Effata, Apriti! [Ephphatha, Be Opened!]* and *Il Lembo del Mantello [The Hem of His Garment]*, follow a similar organizational pattern. In both he provides a meditation that summons the people to work from their own experiences of communication, both good and bad, in order to better understand this vital area. Scriptural meditations provide icons that run through the letters, calling at-

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10. Ibid., p. 49.

tention to different aspects of communication. From them Cardinal Martini draws, first, theological conclusions and, second, an examination of conscience directed toward communication practice.

His method has value beyond these pastoral letters. In *Aetatis Novae*, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications calls for reflection directed towards a theology of communication to guide the Church's work in this area. Drawing on his background in Scriptural studies, Cardinal Martini here shows one way to construct this kind of theological approach. Where some begin in a deductive way from theological themes—as *Communio et Progressio* itself does by basing ecclesial communication on the pattern of “Christ, the perfect communicator” in virtue of the Incarnation—Cardinal Martini takes a scriptural meditation for his starting point. And, as *The Hem of his Garment* demonstrates, that meditation can lead in surprising directions. Cardinal Martini here reads the Scriptures from the perspective of communication. One can envision a more ambitious undertaking that might provide a commentary on one Gospel purely in this way.<sup>11</sup> His method also suggests two other departures from most attempts to develop a theology of communication. First, it places commendable emphasis on the need to pray through the Scriptures in order to understand communication. Second, it insists that communication is a concern of every Christian, not just the domain of specialists.

The first pastoral letter, *Ephphatha, Be Opened!*, focuses on human and interpersonal communication. Beginning with the meditation on Scripture, here on the account of the healing of the man who could neither hear nor speak (Mk 7: 31-37), the letter draws attention to the alienated nature of human communication in our day. In addition Cardinal Mar-

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11. For a good example of an extended commentary on just one passage from the perspective of communication, see the discussion of Jesus meeting the woman at the well in chapter 4 of the Gospel of John by Jean-Marc Chappuis. *Jesus et la Samaritaine: La géométrie variable de la communication*. Genève: Labor et Fides; Paris: Librairie protestante, 1982.



tini provides two other anchors—the story of the tower of Babel and a comment by Ignatius of Antioch. From these he deduces six characteristics of divine communication which form the basis of his instruction. Finally, he invites all of us to examine our lives for signs of the things that block communication.

The second letter, *The Hem of his Garment*, looks towards the mass media. Again Cardinal Martini starts with the scriptural meditation (this time on the account of the healing of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus's garment in Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:42-48) and invites us to hold this in our minds together with the twin images of the Trinity and the cross. The letter then proceeds with a series of imagined conversations (first with the television set, then with communicators) and imagined perspectives: from the living room, from the rooftops of the city, and from a satellite. Each of these touches back to the images of Trinity and cross and each proves the basis for a set of questions with which we can interrogate our media habits.

As noted before, both pastoral letters move from such reflections through examinations of conscience and concrete practices to very specific diocesan plans. These plans target different groups within the diocese: the Caritas program, immigrants, the Montini religious education centers, the young—especially teens participating in the Assembly of Sicheim or enrolled in the Samuel Group. Such specification follows naturally from a view that communication, far from being a theoretical or idealistic activity—much less the domain of experts—occurs in the very tangible situations of our lives. Moreover, Cardinal Martini recognizes that the community must help particular groups perhaps more than others. Therefore, he calls attention to the strangers who need community, to the young who constitute the future of the Church, to parish ministers who hold in trust the local community.

Cardinal Martini's letters, while addressing Milan, also address the whole Church. People of every diocese can benefit from them, not only as spiritual reading but even as proposals

for diocesan activities. In addition, they could (and should) be read together with *Inter Mirifica*, *Communio et Progressio*, *Aetatis Novae*, and the Medellin statement. These documents paint a comprehensive picture of the Church's encounter with communication in our day. One might complement their reading with a look at the Church's actual work in the area of communication. Working together with UNDA, OCIC, and UCIP,<sup>12</sup> most regions now produce printed materials or a Catholic press as well as some Church-sponsored audio-visual material: radio programs, television or video programs, and even some feature-length films.

Cardinal Martini's pastoral letters may also help other dioceses throughout the world respond to the call of *Aetatis Novae* that each diocese develop a comprehensive communication plan. While the work in Milan pre-dates *Aetatis Novae*, it presents communication activities at all levels: family, parish, regional, and diocesan. Encompassing as well both interpersonal and mediated communication, it integrates these with the other activities of the diocese. Where *Aetatis Novae* and other Church documents propose a rationale for communication, Cardinal Martini highlights its existential aspects. Together, they give a vision of what the Church can do.

This edition of Cardinal Martini's pastoral letters on communication concludes with eight Christmas letters he wrote in 1991 to "express in a more accessible way" not the grand theme of mass media and society but the equally important one of the media at home and in the family.<sup>13</sup> While the pastoral letters reflect on the relationship of the Church and the media, these shorter letters—more "pastoral" in tone—reflect on the media and what the Council called the home Church. The letters, not at all theoretical, address parents and grandparents, students and teenagers, athletes and college-aged catechists; they bring Cardinal Martini's insight to

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12. UCIP is the International Catholic Press Association (Union Catholique Internationale de la Presse).

13. *Parliamo di televisione in famiglia* (Milan: Centro Ambrosiano, 1991).

bear on the very real ways we watch television and use the media.

Despite the differences between an Italian family in the urban centers of Milan and families in the cities and suburbs of the English-speaking world, and despite the seeming simplicity of language and tone, these letters can speak powerfully to us. They so clearly show the concern of a pastor for his people that they invite us to see our relationship with the media not in the intellectual manner of the pastoral letters but in a conversational manner, in the manner of a heart-to-heart talk with a friend. And Cardinal Martini's last letter—addressed to the Baby Jesus—lets us share his own prayer and gives us a humbling perspective on all our communication.

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